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REVIEW AND APPRAISAL OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit herewith a statement by the Administrative Committee on Coordination for consideration by the General Assembly at its special session.

* A/S-19/1 (to be issued).

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ANNEX

Statement by the Administrative Committee on Coordination to the General Assembly at its special session

1. Sustainable development remains one of the most important challenges facing humanity as it approaches the twenty-first century. Yet there is growing concern that failure to accelerate economic growth and development in vast areas of the world, to resolve burning social problems, to correct unsustainable production and consumption patterns and increasing inequity, and to halt deterioration of the environment will irreversibly limit national capacities to respond to future challenges.

2. It is the collective view of the executive heads of the organizations of the United Nations system participating in the Administrative Committee on Coordination that the concept of sustainable development provides an over-arching policy framework for the entire spectrum of United Nations system-wide activities at the global, regional and country levels. Sustainable development, as set out in Agenda 21, the action plan of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held at Rio de Janeiro, calls for the implementation of inter-related policies promoting economic development, improved social equity and environmental sustainability. As such, it requires a more integrated approach to policy development, involving new ways of thinking, new institutional mechanisms and new partnerships with a wide variety of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders.

3. A renewed system-wide effort is called for to address the implications of globalization and liberalization in the world economy, bearing in mind the major new opportunities being opened up for trade and investment and information and technology flows, but also the risks of marginalization of the poorest countries, and the poorest groups, especially women and children, within countries.

4. International commitments to achieving sustainable development have been strengthened by the outcomes of the series of major world development conferences held during the 1990s.[1] These meetings have focused attention on the social dimension of sustainable development, in particular the overwhelming priority of poverty alleviation. Widespread poverty is a core factor in perpetuating economic stagnation, social deprivation, ill health and environmental degradation. Other conferences have increased attention to the socio-economic aspects of sustainable development.[2]

5. Successful efforts have been made to sensitize public opinion and to mobilize international cooperation, as well as to adopt specific programmes to implement Agenda 21 and to establish relevant institutional mechanisms at the international, regional, national and local levels. However, much remains to be done to restore the momentum generated at the Rio Conference and fulfil the commitments made there. Greater political leadership is needed to forge global partnership to advance Agenda 21.

6. The Administrative Committee on Coordination is resolved to meet the major challenges involved in effective implementation of commitments made at the Rio Conference. Follow-up will require a high degree of policy integration and the Committee is intent on continuing its development of effective tools and techniques to improve system-wide coordination within the United Nations system. Major change and adaptation have already been undertaken in this regard to support effective implementation at the international and national levels.

7. The Administrative Committee on Coordination attaches the greatest importance to the improvement of field-level implementation of the Rio commitments, through a coordinated approach at the country level. It particularly supports the strengthening of inter-agency cooperation at the regional level, which has great potential for practical programme delivery. Enhanced cooperation will include regional organizations outside the United Nations system.

8. The Administrative Committee on Coordination is committed to the further enhancement of cooperation among organizations of the United Nations system and a wide variety of non-governmental stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations, major groups and other components of civil society. Linkages among functional responsibilities for information resources, policy development and operational programmes will be explored in the period following the 1997 review.

9. The Administrative Committee on Coordination believes that the task manager system of the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development has led to more effective use of resources and expertise within the United Nations system and is a promising improvement over previous efforts at inter-agency cooperation. However, the system has not yet reached its full potential in terms of defining policy linkages and the sharing of responsibilities to achieve full programme synergy. The Administrative Committee on Coordination will continue to strengthen inter-agency coordination with the aim of advancing more integrated and cost-efficient policy approaches. The Inter-Agency Committee will play an important role in this regard.

10. Coordination cannot be achieved at the secretariat level alone, however. The executive heads of the organizations of the United Nations system participating in the Administrative Committee on Coordination would welcome the development of clearer and more consistent intergovernmental and national level policies for sustainable development. Clear guidance at the international and national levels would greatly facilitate the efforts of United Nations agencies to carry out their mandates effectively, and reduce the possibility of dissipation of scarce financial resources.

11. An important constraint is the financial crisis affecting the United Nations and many of the specialized agencies, which leaves little room for expanded initiatives. The expectations of additional resources raised at Rio have not been fulfilled. As a result, many organizations are having difficulty in carrying out the important activities resulting from the Conference and responding to the additional work requirements of the Commission on Sustainable Development.

12. Experience gained since the Conference has led the Administrative Committee on Coordination to the firm belief that the time has come for a new approach to policy-making which stresses practical actions to achieve sustainable development. Intergovernmental policy discussions could usefully be reoriented to focus on a limited number of strategic priority issues, the emphasis being on linkages between resource management and the role of economic actors and major groups. Such an approach would stimulate greater attention to cross-cutting issues such as population, gender, health, impact on children, production and consumption patterns, and to means of implementation, in particular financing mechanisms and technology transfer, capacity-building and education.

Notes

[1] The World Summit for Children, the World Conference on Education for All, the World Conference on Human Rights, the International Conference on Population and Development, the World Summit for Social Development, the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction, the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, the Fourth World Conference on Women and the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements.

[2] The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (ninth session), the World Trade Organization Ministerial Meeting in Singapore and the World Food Summit.

APPENDIX

Sustainable development in the United Nations system: an explanatory note

FROM CONCEPT TO ACTION

1. The commitments made at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and other conferences have presented a major challenge to the entire system of United Nations programmes and institutions. Effective implementation of Agenda 21 and other Rio agreements, as well as the need for coherent multidisciplinary support to intergovernmental processes in the area of sustainable development, particularly to the Commission on Sustainable Development, have had a significant effect on virtually all organizations and programmes of the United Nations system, both jointly - in particular through the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development - and individually. The Administrative Committee on Coordination believes that the challenge has generally been met with enthusiasm and a solid commitment by the United Nations system. The specialized agencies and the programmes have proved flexible enough to make structural, programme and budget changes to enable them to provide support for the implementation of Agenda 21.

2. However, a key difficulty faced by the United Nations system is that not all governing and policy-making bodies have the same understanding of the concept of sustainable development. In some cases, sustainability is equated with environmentally sound management of natural resources, to the neglect of broader social and economic issues. Improved policy coordination across various governing bodies within the United Nations system is essential to ensuring policy coherence, more effective joint programming, more efficient deployment of resources and the avoidance of duplication resulting from overlapping tasks which might be mandated to different secretariats by their governing bodies.

3. Sustainable development demands a qualitatively different approach to coordination at both policy-making and programme implementation levels. United Nations agencies and secretariats of conventions have had to develop new institutional arrangements which can facilitate intersectoral cooperation, and new programming techniques within and between organizations. Institutional innovation is also occurring in national aid agencies. Greater cooperation between bilateral and multilateral agencies would enhance and encourage the wider adoption of these approaches.

4. In addition, Member States should promote effective coordination at the level of intergovernmental decision-making. In the language of Agenda 21, the Commission on Sustainable Development is to "rationalize the intergovernmental decision-making capacity for the integration of environment and development issues". This mandate has not been fully realized. The Commission's role is political; it does not have decision-making authority with respect to other intergovernmental processes, but it can promote common policy approaches, geared to cross-sectoral issues, to advance sustainable development if relevant responses are ensured throughout the United Nations system.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

A new approach to international policy-making

5. Experience with policy development and implementation in the years since the Rio Conference has made clear the need for new approaches which stress the operational aspects of sustainable development. Intergovernmental dialogue on sustainable development could usefully be reorganized to consider a limited number of strategic priority issues, so as to develop a more focused approach to relevant activities in the United Nations system both at the international and at the regional and country levels. The Administrative Committee on Coordination supports the proposals concerning the work programme of the Commission on Sustainable Development after 1997 contained in the report of the Secretary-General on overall progress achieved since Rio.[a] The new work programme would subject a limited number of thematic areas to in-depth consideration, highlighting the linkages with relevant chapters of Agenda 21 and the role of relevant economic sectors and major groups. This approach would promote a new emphasis on cross-cutting issues such as production and consumption patterns, population, health, impacts on gender and children and means of implementation, including finance and technology transfer, capacity-building and education, which will be essential to the development of practical and integrated policies.

Operations at the regional level

6. Since the Conference new forms of inter-agency cooperation have emerged at the regional level. They include cooperation between the regional commissions and regional representatives of the global United Nations agencies and programmes. Examples are the adoption of the Regional Action Programme for Asia and the Pacific, the establishment by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, in cooperation with United Nations Environment Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, of the Joint Committee on Environment and Development in the Arab Region and the upcoming memorandum of understanding between the United Nations Children's Fund and the World Bank on collaboration in water supply, environment and sanitation in Africa. Moreover, regional organizations outside the United Nations system have taken an active role in some regions in preparing regional plans and programmes to follow up on United Nations conferences and other international programme activities, and implementation of conventions. However, achieving a better balance between work at the global level and work at the regional level will be essential for success in the next stage of Agenda 21 implementation. In those areas of sustainable development where regional approaches may prove to be most promising, possibilities for entrusting the United Nations regional commission with a more active coordination role should also be explored.

7. It is necessary to intensify regional implementation of the three Rio conventions, namely, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa, particularly through undertaking initiatives aimed at linking activities and projects in the areas of drought and desertification, climate change, forests and biodiversity. Regional cooperation

is also vital in implementing related conventions and the commitments stemming from the series of global conferences organized by the United Nations since 1990, all of which have incorporated the fundamental principles and policy goals of Agenda 21. Regional cooperation will continue to be of great importance in implementing regional environmental agreements.

Operations at the national level

8. It is recognized that institutional cooperation at the national level should be based on country needs and requirements and an appropriate enabling context. Where national sustainable development strategies exist, and national institutional arrangements promote an integrated approach, this facilitates inter-agency cooperation and partnership. Progress in these areas, however, has been slow. Organizations with mainly analytical or normative roles and no country representation have no direct access at the country level and few means of interaction with potential partners.

9. Improved country-level coordination is needed not only among the international and regional organizations but also, in particular, among the donor programmes and activities, which are sometimes carried out in isolation from relevant inter-agency activities and national coordination mechanisms. Such coordination is needed both for the implementation of Agenda 21 initiatives, and for effective follow-up among focal points dealing with the major environmental, social and developmental conventions. Country strategy notes, which were proposed as a basis for country-level coordination, have not yet emerged as a mechanism that can ensure effective interorganizational cooperation, and the resident coordinator system has not yet realized its full potential and needs further strengthening and commitment by the system as a whole.

REVIEW OF INTER-AGENCY COORDINATION*

The Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development and its task manager system

10. Almost immediately after the Rio Conference, the Administrative Committee on Coordination, taking into account provisions of Agenda 21, decided on an institutional framework for promoting a coherent system-wide response to Conference follow-up requirements. That framework was built on an innovative model that combined central coordination functions, vested in the mandates of the Administrative Committee on Coordination and the newly established Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development, and decentralized allocation of specific responsibilities to relevant organizations of the United Nations system, based on their comparative strengths, to act as task managers for various programme components of Agenda 21.

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* The Administrative Committee on Coordination undertook a review of the functioning of the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development as part of its preparations for the special session of the General Assembly. A summary of the results of the review exercise is given in this section of the statement.

11. As more experience has been gained in the implementation of Agenda 21 and in the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development, modalities for inter-agency collaboration have evolved considerably. The Inter-Agency Committee has gained in importance as an umbrella for coordination initiatives, which at the same time give full rein to numerous, more specialized inter-agency mechanisms. Experience shows that those mechanisms have worked best when taking a focused, thematic approach. That permits them to draw more deeply on each agency's expertise and resources and promotes detailed, technical collaboration related to data and information, policy and practice, or operational programmes. This has to be taken fully into account in future work, which includes improving the effectiveness of the Administrative Committee on Coordination's subcommittees on freshwater and on oceans and coastal areas; the latter subcommittee was called for by the Commission on Sustainable Development.

12. System-wide work aimed at further broadening and deepening existing inter-agency collaboration and coordination in follow-up to the Rio Conference has become an ongoing process in the United Nations system. It includes continuing consideration of measures aimed at improving the delivery capacity and coordination at the field level, enhancing policy coordination at the global, regional and country levels, better interaction between the Inter-Agency Committee and other bodies and mechanisms of the Administrative Committee on Coordination for inter-agency coordination, streamlining requests for reporting, and involvement of organizations outside the United Nations system, among others.

13. The task manager system should continue to promote greater interaction with other inter-agency arrangements, including those established to follow up other recent United Nations conferences. It has furthered outreach beyond the framework of the United Nations system, with a view to involving other relevant intergovernmental organizations and processes, as well as partners from major groups and the non-governmental organizations.

14. Task managers should continue to expand their efforts to involve major groups more widely in consultations regarding the preparation of reports for the Commission and implementation of sustainable development activities and, when appropriate, to invite experts from major groups to participate in inter-agency expert meetings.

15. In the view of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, these evolving arrangements have generally allowed the United Nations system to provide a flexible, collaborative and participatory mechanism to support the implementation of Agenda 21 and coordination of various sustainable development activities. Successful examples of system-wide collaboration, particularly at the programme/country levels, include the Interorganizational Programme on the Sound Management of Chemicals, established as an inter-agency partnership arrangement in support of the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety; the informal Inter-Agency Task Force on Forests, established to respond to the needs of the Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Panel on Forests; and cooperation in the context of the Commission's programme on indicators for sustainable development. Several cooperative inter-agency programmes which preceded the Conference, particularly in the area of science, information and analysis, have now been

linked to the Inter-Agency Committee through its task manager system, such as the World Climate Programme.

16. The Administrative Committee on Coordination believes that the task manager system of the Inter-Agency Committee has generally led to more effective use of resources and expertise within the United Nations system and is a promising improvement over previous efforts at inter-agency cooperation and joint action. It has rationalized the preparation of reports for the Commission and facilitated contributions among organizations based on their specialized mandates. By encouraging systematic communication and information exchange, it has helped disseminate knowledge of means to promote sustainable development and reduced duplication of effort.

17. Nevertheless, it is the view of the Administrative Committee on Coordination that the task manager system has not yet realized its full potential in fostering coordination among all the agencies. The review of the functioning of the Inter-Agency Committee conducted by the Administrative Committee on Coordination led to the conclusion that a better balance is needed in coordination at global, regional and country/field levels. Cooperation remains underdeveloped at the regional level - although in some instances, such as in the region of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, agencies have been designated as coordinators for specific programme areas of the regional action programme.

18. Further specification of task manager roles will be necessary, to distinguish between ongoing data and information functions, for example, and cooperation at regional or national levels on programme delivery. Task managers should be encouraged to promote joint programming at the regional and subregional levels, and to foster a more integrated approach which incorporates the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development.

Resource Issues

19. Inter-agency coordination entails both benefits and costs. Its goal is to combine the expert skills and financial resources of individual agencies so that policies, information resources, and operational programmes better integrate specific sustainable development concerns. Moreover, resources may be deployed more cost-effectively when agencies collaborate in a mutually reinforcing manner, or when they accept a division of labour which avoids programme duplication. Yet consultations and networking among specialists in different fields take time, and, in spite of the fact that modern communications technology can facilitate and expedite communications, face-to-face interactions remain essential in generating responsiveness and improving results. Meetings require staff time for preparing discussion papers and reports, as well as travel expenses.

20. The task manager system therefore has its costs. System-wide reporting responsibilities have placed a considerable strain on individual organizations, as they have been borne within existing human and financial resources. It has been difficult financially to keep up representation in the Commission, the Inter-Agency Committee and Agenda 21-related meetings and with those relevant to the agency's mandate. Further operationalization of new political agreements

reached at the intergovernmental level and moving towards joint programming would give rise to additional demands.

21. The financial crisis affecting the United Nations and many of the specialized agencies and programmes leaves little room for innovative and more cooperative initiatives by individual agencies or throughout the system. The expectations raised by the Rio Conference of an increase in available resources have not been met, while the activities that had to be carried out have expanded considerably. The organizations and agencies of the United Nations system are therefore hard-pressed to carry out both their original mandates and those stemming from the Conference and the work requirements of the Commission. At the same time, as changes in programmes and procedures yield appreciable improvements, they offer new opportunities and invite further commitments and requests on the part of Member States.

22. Joint programming, directly involving a limited number of the most concerned agencies, needs to be further fostered. Policy integration and the need for coordinated action are the central messages of Agenda 21. However, it is becoming urgently apparent that efforts to promote integrated approaches to coordination at policy-making and programme implementation levels are not matched by coordinated funding mechanisms. United Nations agencies involved in joint programmes are generally required to seek funding from their own funding bodies, with adverse effects on resource efficiency. In this context, efforts should be increased to enhance the effectiveness of cooperation between various agencies of the United Nations system with international financial institutions, including those outside the United Nations system such as regional development banks. There is, moreover, a need for further development of joint funding arrangements, so that joint funding proposals can be presented for more effective consideration by appropriate funding institutions and mechanisms.

Notes

[a] E/CN.17/1997/2.